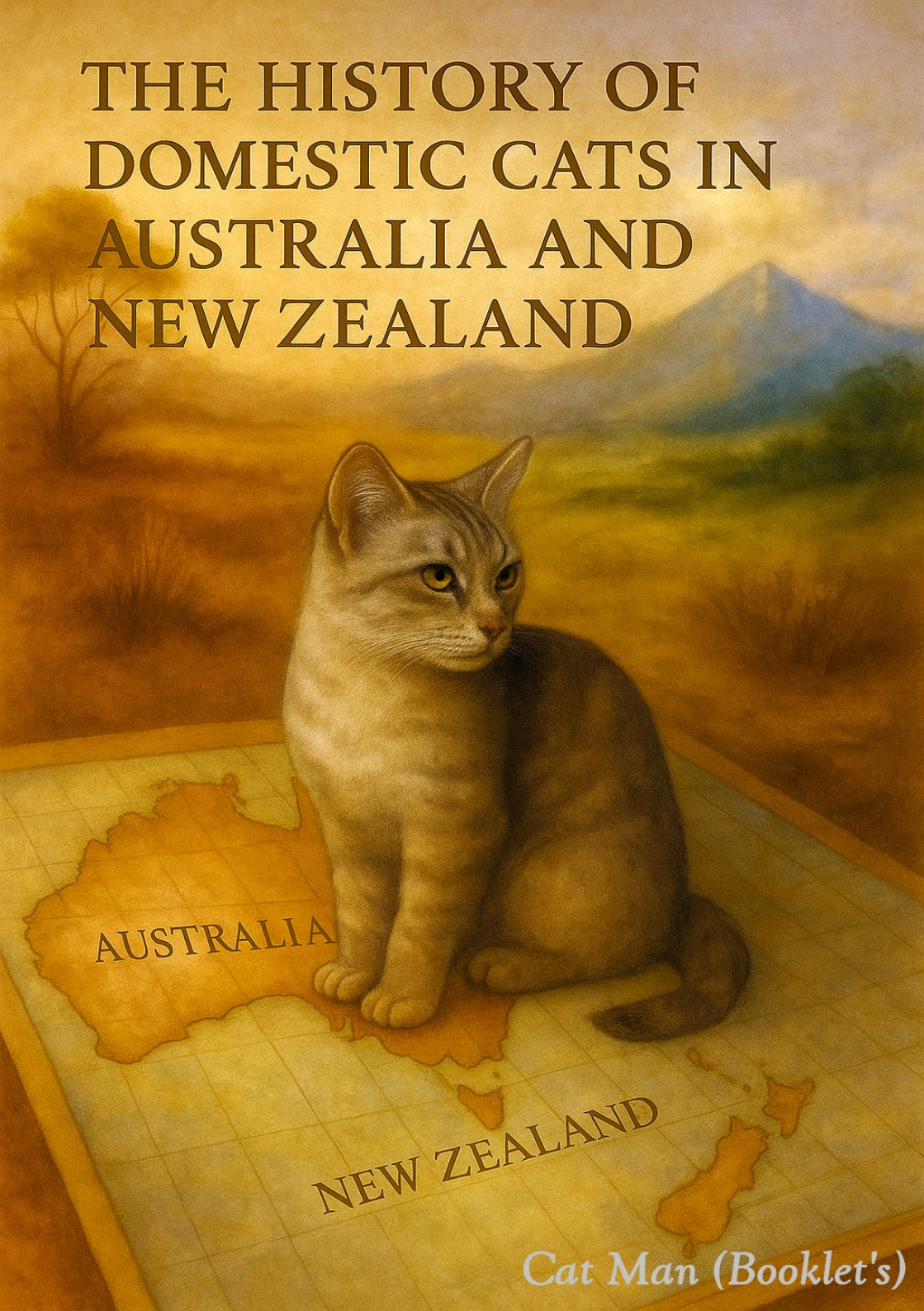
THE HISTORY OF DOMESTIC CATS IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND



Cat Man (Booklet's)

The History of Domestic Cats in Australia and New Zealand

A Comprehensive Overview

Introduction

Australia and New Zealand occupy a unique position in the history of the domestic cat. For millions of years, both regions evolved in isolation, developing fragile ecosystems largely free from land-dwelling mammals. Cats only arrived with European colonisation, first as practical companions and later as beloved pets. Their arrival marked a profound turning point in both ecological and cultural development.

What began as a solution to control rats and mice soon had far-reaching consequences. The cat's remarkable adaptability allowed it to spread quickly across diverse landscapes. While valued in towns and rural settlements, cats dramatically altered natural environments once they entered the wild. The human bond with cats has since stood in stark contrast to the impact of feral populations on native wildlife.

This booklet traces the story of domestic cats in Australia and New Zealand from their initial arrival to the present day. It examines their introduction and spread, the rise of feral populations, and modern efforts to manage the resulting challenges.
It also highlights the complex relationship between people, cats, and nature in these two island nations.

Chapter 1
The Beginnings of the Domestic Cat
Origin and Domestication

The domestication of the cat began around 10 000 years ago in the Middle East, when the rise of agriculture led humans to store grain, which attracted mice. The primary ancestor of the domestic cat is the African wildcat (*Felis lybica*), native to Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia.

Australia and New Zealand, with their long geographic isolation and the absence of native mammalian predators, possess ecosystems of exceptional sensitivity. This isolation made their environments especially vulnerable to introduced species such as cats. In both countries, the cat holds a dual role: on one hand a beloved companion animal, on the other a significant invasive species.

This chapter provides a broad historical overview of domestic cats in Australia and New Zealand, explores their ecological impact, and traces the development of their role in society – from early companions of settlers to the subject of modern conservation policy challenges.

Chapter 2
Arrival - First Footprints in a New Land

In Australia, the generally accepted date for the arrival of domestic cats is tied to the First Fleet in 1788. European sailors and settlers most likely brought them. While there are speculations about earlier introductions, such as Dutch shipwrecks along the western coast in the 17th and 18th centuries or Makassan trepang fishers around 1650, historical records and genetic studies point clearly to the First Fleet. DNA analyses of feral cats show predominantly European ancestry, with possible later influences from Asia.

Other early documented introductions include Edward Henty bringing cats to the Portland Bay district (Victoria) in 1824, as well as the Swan River Colony (Perth, Western Australia) around its founding in 1829. Cats were initially kept as household pets and relied upon for pest control in settlements.

In New Zealand, cats most likely arrived with Captain James Cook's ship *HMS Endeavour* in the mid-18th century. One of the earliest mentions of a cat on land dates to 1773, during Cook's second voyage. A broader establishment followed later with European settlers; feral populations were observed roughly 50 years after European arrival in 1769. Cats served on ships for rat control and were even gifted to Māori by explorers such as Cook.

The arrival patterns in both countries are closely tied to European colonisation, initially for pest control on ships and in settlements and as animal companions. Although the exact timing of arrival in Australia is debated, the First Fleet remains the pivotal event. In New Zealand, Cook's voyages mark the beginning, with widespread establishment following the influx of settlers. Genetic evidence in Australia strongly supports a European origin, making the First Fleet a central milestone in the continent's feline history.

Chapter 3
Spreading Across the Land
Establishing a Foothold

In Australia, the initial spread of cats was gradual. They remained close to human settlements at first. As colonies expanded and pastoral farming spread across the landscape, their distribution accelerated. Cats escaped from homes or were released deliberately to control rabbits, although this attempt proved largely ineffective. From the 1860s onwards, large-scale releases occurred, particularly to combat rat infestations.

Around 1880, as the frontier of pastoral settlement reached its limits and new regions opened up, the expansion surged. Cats quickly colonised arid zones and deserts. Within approximately 70 years, they had spread across about 7.6 million square kilometres. By 1890 they were established throughout mainland Australia and Tasmania, with only small exceptions in northern Kimberley regions and on a few offshore islands.

In New Zealand, a similar pattern unfolded. After European arrival in 1769, cats spread gradually and feral populations existed by around 1820. In the 1870s, cats were again intentionally released to control rapidly growing rabbit populations. They subsequently reached more than 30 offshore islands.

The expansion in both countries was rapid, driven by accidental escapes and deliberate releases. The attempt to use cats as biological control for rabbits had far-reaching

consequences. Australia's size and lack of natural predators enabled remarkably fast colonisation. In New Zealand, with a smaller landmass and more varied habitats, the spread was somewhat slower but equally thorough.

The growth of settlements and the expansion of agriculture provided the foundation for the cat's long-term establishment. Human activity and the cat's natural adaptability worked hand in hand to transform the species from domestic companion to successful coloniser across two remote island regions.

Chapter 4
Early Effects on Native Wildlife
A Silent Threat Emerges

In Australia, early reports of feral cats appeared in Sydney in 1824 and in Western Australia in the 1840s. In Tasmania, by the 1840s and 1850s, cats were observed hunting native species such as snakes, birds, and small mammals. The rapid spread across the continent by 1890 coincided with declines in several native species, although the exact link and scale of these early impacts are still being studied.

Some research suggests that the initial effects may have been less severe than later ones, as other forces such as habitat loss and the introduction of additional invasive species also played roles. Nonetheless, predation on favoured prey species between 35 g and 5.5 kg, particularly ground-dwelling animals and those in sparse vegetation, was already significant.

In New Zealand, feral cat populations developed around 1820. Their impact on native wildlife, which evolved without mammalian predators, was especially devastating. Cats contributed to the extinction of at least six endemic bird species and more than 70 local subspecies. A widely cited example is the extinction of the Stephens Island wren around 1895. In the 1980s, kākāpō were removed from Stewart Island/Rakiura to protect them from cat predation. On islands such as Mangere, Herekopare and Raoul, the introduction of cats led to the local extinction of numerous bird species.

Both Australia and New Zealand saw early negative consequences from the establishment of feral cats. In New Zealand, these effects were particularly severe due to the fauna's complete lack of evolutionary experience with mammalian predators. While initial impacts in Australia were in some cases less immediately visible, New Zealand witnessed rapid and dramatic ecosystem changes. The combination of highly efficient feline predators and prey unprepared for such threats caused profound shifts in native biodiversity.

Chapter 5
Cats in the Colonies
Companions and Pest Control

In Australia, cats were relatively uncommon as pets until the 1830s. Their popularity increased once their effectiveness in controlling rodents in growing towns became clear. By the 1860s, they were being intentionally placed in agricultural areas outside settlements to combat rat infestations, especially bush rats.

In the 1880s, cats were also employed in the effort to control rapidly expanding rabbit populations, though this strategy proved largely ineffective and instead promoted further spread. By the mid-1860s, cats in some regions were already being viewed as pests, with early recorded culling efforts.

In New Zealand, early European settlers introduced cats both as household pets and for rodent control. By the 1860s, they were widely kept as companions. Workers in remote camps often kept cats for pest control, and ships continued to carry them as standard practice. Some Māori who received cats from early explorers even used them as a food source.

In both countries, cats initially served practical purposes: protecting supplies and controlling pests. As settlement progressed, their role gradually evolved from utilitarian animal to valued companion.

The use of cats against New Zealand's and Australia’s rabbit plague stands as a notable example of well-intentioned but ecologically damaging attempts at biological control.

Chapter 6
Rise of the Wild
The Development of Feral Populations

In Australia, records of feral cats date back to 1824 in Sydney and the 1840s in Western Australia. Key factors in their spread included escape from human care, purposeful releases for pest control, remarkable adaptability across varied environments, and high reproductive capacity.

Female cats can reproduce at a young age and may have multiple litters per year. As a result, feral populations quickly became self-sustaining and independent from domestic cats. By the 1870s, reports described large, robust feral cats in various regions.

In New Zealand, established feral populations appeared roughly 50 years after European arrival, around 1820. Deliberate releases in the 1870s, intended to control rabbits, accelerated their spread dramatically. Feral cats occupied diverse habitats, including remote offshore islands.

These populations became fully independent, no longer reliant on human support or domestic cats.

The development of feral cats in both countries followed a similar trajectory. Domestic cats, equipped with natural hunting instincts and rapid breeding cycles, transformed swiftly into successful wild predators.

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Attempts at biological pest control, although well meant, unintentionally cemented their presence across both nations. The transition from pet to wild predator ultimately became a lasting ecological challenge.

Chapter 7
Modern Ecological Consequences
A Continuing Threat

In Australia, feral cats are considered the most costly invasive pest and one of the greatest threats to native wildlife. They occupy 99.9 percent of the continent, including remote and harsh environments. Their numbers fluctuate with rainfall, ranging from roughly 1.4 to 5.6 million animals. Cat predation is recognised as a primary cause of the extinction of more than 20 mammal species and threatens more than 120 others.

Every year, they kill millions of native mammals, birds, reptiles, frogs, and invertebrates. Cats also transmit diseases such as toxoplasmosis, which pose risks to wildlife and human health. Control efforts include baiting, trapping, targeted shooting, and the creation of fenced predator-free sanctuaries. Several government task forces and national strategies now focus on reducing their numbers.

In New Zealand, feral cats remain a major threat to native wildlife, especially birds, bats, lizards, and insects. They have contributed to the extinction of at least six endemic bird species and have pushed many others toward the brink. Feral cats occupy varied environments, including riverbeds, forests, and subalpine areas, and they also spread toxoplasmosis, affecting both native species and marine mammals.

Control measures include trapping, poison baits, and shooting, particularly in areas with vulnerable species. However, feral cats are currently excluded from the Predator Free New Zealand 2050 initiative, a decision that continues to spark debate among scientists and the public.

The ecological consequences of feral cats in both countries are profound and enduring. Australia's vast landmass makes the scale of the problem immense, while New Zealand's isolated and evolutionarily fragile wildlife remains extremely vulnerable. Despite extensive conservation efforts, controlling feral populations remains a major challenge. The exclusion of cats from New Zealand’s flagship predator-control program highlights the difficulty of balancing scientific necessity, ethics, and public sentiment.

Chapter 8
Beloved Companions in the Modern Era
A Complex Relationship

In Australia, cats are among the most popular pets. Around 29 percent of households own at least one cat, amounting to roughly 3.8 million animals. While their contribution to wildlife mortality is far lower than that of feral cats, it remains a topic of debate. Estimates suggest that domestic cats kill millions of native animals each year. Some experts argue that their impact is overstated compared with damage caused by feral cats or habitat loss.

Nevertheless, awareness of the potential effects of domestic cats is growing. Most Australian states now require microchipping and neutering, and some areas enforce full-time indoor living.

Public opinion remains divided: While most support firm measures against feral cats, restrictions on household pets spark more resistance.

In New Zealand, cat ownership is likewise widespread, with around 41 percent of households keeping at least one cat. Yet domestic cats also prey on native wildlife. Even well-fed cats retain their natural hunting instincts. Public discussions continue regarding responsible ownership and the need for stricter regulations, such as a national cat management law. Trap-neuter-return programs aim to reduce stray populations, though their effectiveness remains contested. Public sentiment is

sharply divided, reflecting the emotional connection many people have with their cats, contrasted with conservation concerns.

In both nations, cats today play an important role in domestic life as cherished companions. At the same time, they present ecological challenges that inspire ethical debate and regulatory proposals. While feral cats are broadly recognised as pests, the role of domestic cats is far more nuanced.

Growing calls for tighter controls reflect rising awareness, yet they also meet resistance from a society in which cats are firmly embedded as family members.

Chapter 9
A Tale of Two Islands
Comparing and Contrasting the Cat's Impact

Similarities:

– Introduction through European colonisation, initially for rodent control and companionship
– Rapid spread and establishment of feral populations
– Significant negative impacts on native wildlife, especially species vulnerable to predation
– Ongoing conservation efforts to control and reduce feral cat numbers
– Growing public debate and awareness regarding the role of domestic cats in nature conservation
– Complex societal attitudes balancing emotional attachment with ecological responsibility

Differences:

– Australia's much larger landmass and ecological diversity led to broader and larger feral cat populations
– Australia's native mammals are particularly affected, whereas New Zealand's impact is most severe on birds
– New Zealand's fauna, having evolved without mammalian predators, is especially vulnerable
– The absence of feral cats in the Predator Free New Zealand 2050 program reflects a more cautious, socially influenced approach, while Australia adopts more direct and assertive measures
– The targeted use of cats to control rabbits played a more significant role in Australia

Although both countries share many parallels in feline history, the scale and nature of the consequences differ markedly. Australia faces a continental challenge that has severely impacted its marsupial fauna. In New Zealand, the lack of evolutionary preparedness among native birds led to swift and dramatic biodiversity losses.

Societal and political responses also differ: Australia employs aggressive measures to reduce feral cat numbers, while New Zealand tends toward more cautious strategies shaped by ethical considerations and public opinion. Each nation illustrates the intricate relationship between people, cats, and the environment, and the substantial cost paid by island ecosystems when nature falls out of balance.

Chapter 10
Conclusion
Reflecting on a Lasting Legacy

The history of domestic cats in Australia and New Zealand stretches from their introduction by European settlers to their present status as cherished pets and, at the same time, as a significant ecological challenge. The impact of feral cats on native biodiversity in both countries is profound and enduring. Numerous extinctions and continuing threats to vulnerable species testify to this legacy.

This story is marked by striking contradictions: what was once introduced as a useful animal for pest control has become, in the wild, a threat to entire ecosystems. While cats are valued companions in towns and homes, they cause serious ecological damage in natural environments. Efforts to reconcile human affection for cats with the demands of conservation continue to this day.

Australia and New Zealand stand as examples of the complex consequences of human intervention in isolated ecosystems. The introduction of the domestic cat set in motion a chain of developments that still shape these environments. Conservation programs, research, and public debate show that the problem is recognised, yet solutions require time, consistency, and a balance between compassion and responsibility.

Ultimately, the history of the cat in these island nations underlines how closely human decisions and natural

processes are intertwined. The challenge lies in finding ways to protect both animal welfare and the unique native biodiversity. Only through collective action and sustainable strategies can the enduring legacy of the cat in Australia and New Zealand be guided toward a more harmonious future.

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